

Excerpt from "Compartments of Latter-Day Adventures"  
by Dennis Dineen

## 1964 Compartment - Cigarettes and Space Travel

"You know what you do? You don't."

That was Mitch Aitken's advice to us ten-year-old boys  
regarding cigarette smoking.

We pondered his words for a second or two,  
but our curiosity got the better of us.

Mitch was typically our group's voice of reason,  
something we attributed to him being raised by a household of women.

His dad died years ago on the living room couch  
after falling into a drunken stupor and hitting his head on the floor.

Since then, Mitch's home life was a matriarchal combination  
of mother, sisters, aunts, and grandmothers  
and they all seemed to promote clean living habits  
of temperance, hygiene, and caution.

We had gathered in our tree fort located in the center of a row of large oak trees  
behind the old demolished BP gas station site, on our lunch hour break from school.

Mac Steinberg had the remains of a package of filtered Export A cigarettes  
that he had swiped out of the glove compartment of his uncle's car.

None of us had smoked a cigarette before,  
so there was an air of silent apprehension.

Mitch wanted no part of our plan, but he was content to observe us  
like he was studying the behavior of monkeys in a cage.

I was willing to try smoking a cigarette and so was Dudley Wagner.

Dudley was usually willing to go with the flow  
of whatever new idea was floating around in our group.

He was a heavy kid for his age and he had a good-looking blonde mother  
that often told him not to "pull any boners," every time he left his house.

We always got a laugh out of that and repeated her words to Dudley  
whenever we got the notion.

"Don't pull any boners, Dudley."

We all thought his mother was hot, but we never mentioned it to him.

Most boys our age wanted to escape something.

It seemed like a natural rite of passage

for every Grade 4 boy to dream about some form of escape.

Our plan was simply to build some kind of reliable rocket ship,  
fly up into the stars, and escape this life we were living on Earth.

The possibility of space travel was a big thing to us kids.

The media bombarded us with TV shows and movies about space travel adventures and creatures from other galaxies. Our local library had plenty of science fiction books and the small Variety stores and Smoke shops had racks of science fiction magazines & comic books for sale. Buck Rogers & Flash Gordon were our heroes.

We began drafting designs for our spaceship as though we were highly qualified NASA engineers. We were discussing the size of the fuel tank we would need when a couple of grade 3 boys wandered absent-mindedly under our tree fort. They both had round brush-cut heads. One of the boys was Skip Connor, whose big burly father sang hymns like an opera tenor at Our Lady of Perpetual Sorrow Catholic church every Sunday. Mac saw the top of Skip Connor's head as a perfect target from our vantage point, so he undid his zipper, pulled out his penis, and urinated out the side of the tree fort. The thin yellow streak came down on Skip Connor's head like an eavestrough overflowing rain down on a slab of concrete. It took Skip a few nanoseconds to realize something wasn't right, when he suddenly moved out of the way, looked up, and wiped his head in disgust. He and his friend ran away, as Skip looked over his shoulder at us and yelled, "I'm telling on you guys. You guys are in for big trouble."

Our tree fort filled with laughter. Mac had a mean streak in him a mile wide. He was always the first one in our group to instigate a practical joke on someone. We figured his disposition was likely influenced by the regular beatings his father gave him. His father's name was Siegfried, and he was a man we all feared, especially when he got angry. He had a stocky frame with broad shoulders like a football player and thick hairy muscular arms. One Saturday afternoon we were all huddled in the living room at the Steinberg house when Siegfried entered with the massive Toronto telephone book in his hand. He had a calm, mischievous expression on his face as he gazed at us boys sitting on the long couch, and with a soft confident voice, he said, "Watch this."

He then proceeded to clutch the telephone book with both of his hands and in a matter of seconds, he tore the book in half.

"Wow!"

We were all in quiet awe.

Siegfried had our undivided attention.

Even Mac was silent with no comment, which was unusual.

Siegfried smiled with an air of triumph then quietly left the room.

We looked at one another and though the words were never spoken, we silently agreed that Siegfried was not a man we wanted to, "piss off."

Mac handed out cigarettes to me and Dudley.

We both studied the thin cylinder sticks carefully.

I was impressed with the texture of the filter and the scent of the tobacco.

Mac pulled an Ebby matchbox out of his pocket and gave us an evil-eyed expression as the match-stick scratched the sandpaper strip and sparked into a flame.

We would soon become familiar with Mac and his matchboxes when we got into our gunpowder-making adventures the following year, but that is another story.

We lit our cigarettes off the same flame and then smoked like we knew what we were doing.

"Did you inhale all the way?" was the big question.

Mac looked at me and said,

"Art, you chicken-shit. You're not inhaling."

"Neither is Mitch," I replied.

"Just give me a sec' ... I'm working on it."

I didn't mind the visual part of smoking.

I thought the smoke looked cool coming out of my mouth.

But I did not like the taste of it and the first time I tried inhaling the smoke, it got partway down my throat when I began to hack violently.

Dudley wasn't doing much better, he was barking like a dog and going pale.

Mac seemed to handle the smoking etiquette, and he was getting a kick out of watching us suffer.

Mac's only problem was his long, thick, crooked nose that smoke found its way into, like a vacuum, bringing tears to his eyes.

I inhaled once and that was enough.

I started feeling strange, and light-headed, like I was turning green.

About a third of the cigarette was all I could handle.

Dudley quit smoking his cigarette before I did.

Mac boldly hung in there, but it was mainly for show.

He didn't get much more than half his cigarette smoked

when he gently butted the end of it out on the floor  
and put it back into the now sinister-looking Export A package.  
I was feeling sick like I was going to throw up.  
It seemed to take forever for the white fog  
of cigarette smoke in the tree fort to dissipate.  
We sat quietly for a while welcoming the fresh air to eventually repair us.  
"Art, you looked as white as a ghost. So did you, Dudley.  
Do you guys want to try this again after school?  
They say the more you do it, the easier it gets."  
Dudley did not comment.  
"I've had enough of cigarette smoking for a while," I replied with a rasp.

It turned out I didn't try cigarettes for another seven years,  
until my third year of high school,  
and then the motivation was to meet girls,  
not to enjoy the benefits of smoking tobacco.  
I guess the same went for beer.  
My dad let me have a taste of Molson Export ale  
out of a dark brown stubby bottle  
while we were watching a Leaf's hockey game.  
I was about ten years old, and I hated the taste of it.  
I couldn't understand why my dad drank beer so much.  
What was so appealing about it?  
It took a few years, but I eventually learned the answer,  
in more ways than one.

After the color had returned to our faces  
we got back to discussing the fuel tank  
for the rocket ship we were designing.  
It was our number one priority.  
Dudley suggested that we should start hunting around for parts  
before we went back to school.  
We climbed down out of our tree fort and searched the area around us.  
In those days it was a vast wasteland  
with piles of dirt and rocks everywhere  
located on the north-west corner of Markham Road and Kingston Road,  
long before a plaza had been built  
and long before the church parking lot had been paved with asphalt.  
Soon Mitch yelled out to us,  
"Here's something we could probably use."  
What a coincidence!  
He found an old gasoline tank behind the BP gas station demolition site.  
It was partly submerged in dirt.  
We managed to dig it out and move it to a better location  
near the tree fort, where we would have easy access to it

for adding to the components of our future spaceship.  
It was a filthy, cumbersome job that involved all four of us  
gripping the tank wherever we could get a hold of it.  
It was an odd-shaped object with various size holes  
and not easily balanced while moving.

Time was marching on when Mitch said,  
"It's getting late, we'd better head back to school."  
We knew we were running late  
when we heard the one o'clock outdoor bell ringing.  
The grade four classes were divided into two portables  
at the west end of the schoolyard.  
Our class was the back portable closest to the baseball diamond.  
We entered our portable quietly, hung our coats on wall hooks  
at the back of the classroom, and then sat down at our desks.  
Our teacher was a short, plump, brunette lady  
named Miss Bernard and she was not a shy woman.  
She had a loud booming voice.  
I often wondered if it was her natural voice  
or an acquired voice she inherited from teaching.  
A few minutes into our phonics lesson had passed  
when she suddenly frowned at the class and inquired,  
"What is that smell?"  
All the students looked about in confusion  
wondering what the lingering odor was.  
"What is that smell?" she repeated loudly.  
Finally, Miss Bernard answered her own question  
as she charged toward the back of the classroom.  
"It's gasoline!"  
She could smell it coming off our coats.  
"What were you boys doing?"  
First, she looked hard with burning eyes at Dudley,  
but he was noncommittal and acted as surprised as everyone else.  
Then she stared Mitch down and asked again,  
"What were you boys doing?"  
All Mitch could do was shrug his shoulders sheepishly and look at me.  
Miss Bernard directed her inquiry at me,  
"Art ... what have you boys been up to?"  
"We had to move a gas tank," I replied quickly  
with no conviction whatsoever.  
"A gas tank?"  
"What on earth for?"  
She didn't wait for the answer I was struggling to find  
as she swung the back exit door open for some fresh air.  
With raging determination, she tracked down the evidence

and piled our coats on the floor at the back of the classroom.

After a few uncomfortable moments, things simmered down and Miss Bernard went back to the task of teaching us the afternoon lessons on the curriculum.

The four of us want-to-be space travelers kept a quiet and subdued profile for the rest of the afternoon,

which I thought was especially remarkable coming from a guy like Mac, who usually got "ants in his pants" as the school day dragged on.

There was a certain irony in the nonchalant stares we were getting from our classmates, along with Miss Bernard's puzzled lingering glances directed at each of us, as though we might very well have been rocket ship space travelers who had just returned to Earth after years of exploring faraway galaxies. We might as well have been aliens!